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"THE MEANING OF MESSIAH IN JEWISH THOUGHT"

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THE MEANING OF MESSIAH IN JEWISH THOUGHT

The messianic idea was forged in the crucible of crisis. Confronted with mounting evidence that neither Israel nor Judah could withstand the onslaught of such mighty imperial powers as Assyria and Babylonia, inspired prophets sought to understand Yahweh's purpose. Steadfast in their belief that Yahweh was one and omnipotent, and reassured by the mighty acts which Yahweh had performed for Israel in years⁶⁻⁷¹² by, prophets like Amos, Hoseah, Micah, and Isaiah looked upon the turbulence of events as sure signs of Yahweh's power and as striking evidence of his concern for His people Israel. The ravaging of the land, the despoiling of the people, even the trudging off into exile testified to Yahweh's omnipotence, not His helplessness, to His loving justice, not to the abandonment of His people. Assyria was the rod of His anger, an instrument, not a power in its own right. The devastation and destruction was meted out by Yahweh as punishment--proof of Yahweh's strength, not evidence of His weakness. The prophets stubbornly refused to be swayed either by empirical facts or by necessary inference. Instead of allowing the facts to speak for themselves, these prophets insisted on speaking for the facts.

Their reasoning was simple. Since Yahweh was omnipotent, and since Yahweh's essential attributes were justice, righteousness and loving-kindness, and since the covenant with Israel was a covenant binding Israel to Yahweh's singularity and to His attributes, Yahweh would be remiss were He not to punish Israel when they flaunted His singularity by worshipping other gods, and when they denied His essential attributes by mocking justice.

and ridiculing righteousness, by grounding down the poor, and humiliating the meek. The destruction of the Kingdom of Israel bore stunning testimony both to Yahweh's omnipotence and to His essence, even as the subsequent destruction of Judah was to remove the last lingering doubt that Yahweh was absolutely in control, omnipotent through His proven power to punish His people for the violation of the solemn covenant He had made with their forefathers, a covenant binding them to Yahweh's singularity, omnipotence, and essential attributes.

The prophets thus had an explanation for negative experience, but how were they to resolve the more difficult problem. If Israel was to continue as Yahweh's people, what could they look forward to when they had absorbed their punishment, mended their ways, and dedicated themselves to righteousness and justice? In a world dominated by imperial powers, could they ever enjoy true independence? In a world of rivalrous nations, could they ever enjoy peace? In a world of exploitation and inequity, could the hungry be well-fed, the poor prosperous, the humiliated treated with dignity?

The answer to these questions was found in Yahweh's omnipotence, in His essential attributes--justice, righteousness, mercy, loving-kindness--and in His inviolate covenant with Israel. Yahweh would "on that day"--whenever that day might be--dissolve the old order of relentless war, degrading poverty, rampant unrighteousness, triumphant injustice, and ubiquitous disharmony, and shape in its stead a truly new creation wherein justice will be the line, and righteousness the plummet, and wherein "your covenant with death will be annulled and your agreement with Sheol

will not stand." (Isaiah 28:17-18). On that day divine sovereignty will put human sovereignty to shame as the shoot which has come forth from the stump of Jesse "judges the poor with righteousness and decides with equity for the meek of the earth. . . Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist; and faithfulness the girdle of his loins." The very laws of nature will be suspended as the wolf dwells with the lamb, the leopard lies down with the kid, the suckling child plays over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child puts his hand on the adder's den." Destruction and hurt will be no more in all of God's holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:1-9).

How utterly beautiful those latter days will be when

"the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come and say
'Come! Let us go to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth the Law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore."

Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah

Indeed, so altered will be the course of history that even the most congenital of enmities will ^{dissolve} find their way into ^{enduring} friendship, as warring peoples become aware that each is the chosen of the living God:

"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptian will worship with the Assyrian.

"In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'" Isaiah 19:23-25

The prophet Isaiah thus never leaves us in doubt. The very same God who had all the power necessary to punish his people had all the power necessary to transmute nature, society, and the very heart of man. The vision of the perfect king, the shoot of Jesse's stock was simultaneously the vision of a recreated world built on foundations of economic and social equity, harmony among nations, and creative collaboration between humankind and nature.

Isaiah's vision of "that day" is the most vivid portrayal of the "messianic" idea as developed in the Bible. It is a vision shared by all the prophets who agonized over Israel's pain and who, for this very reason, believed firmly that God's redemption

must be no less impressive than His condemnation. It was, by every worldly measure, a figment of the prophets' imagination, a fantasy of impossibilities, a dream of no substance, a mirage of unrealizable hopes. It was a vision belied by experience, refuted by the facts, and dashed by the subsequent course of events. For in the days that followed, no king ascended the throne of David, much less a perfect king; justice and righteousness did not become the line and the plummet, imperial powers did not desist from warfare, and the lion did not lie down with the lamb. The prophets, so it seemed, had indeed dreamed dreams.

II

The age of messianic scenarios was followed by an age of sober reconstruction. There was a grand sweeping away of the traditional leadership élites. Davidic aspirations were extinguished; expectations of independence were dashed; and the voice of the prophet was no longer heard in the land. With the formal promulgation^{AND ACCEPTANCE} of the Pentateuch sometime between 445 and 397^{B.C.E.}, the immutable written revelation of God dissolved the need for prophets, even as it undergirded the need for firm, decisive, priestly leadership--a leadership with no longings for political independence and no hankerings for a renewal of divisive, disruptive, and cacophonous prophets. For this priestly class, the Law was fixed and eternal; it guaranteed salvation in this world for those who obeyed its injunctions and sought atonement through the sacrificial cult and its expiating priesthood. The altar stood guard over the land; guaranteed sure and abundant harvests;

promised the fruitfulness of the womb and long life for all those who hearkened unto the commandments which God had thundered forth on Sinai.

The Pentateuch is a sober, revelation. Promises are in line with realistic possibilities. A fruitful land could indeed be prosperous if it were at peace. Prosperous peasants might indeed anticipate a long and satisfying life, if the rain came in its due season, and dew was plentiful, and imperial powers were benevolent exactors of tribute, not ravaging spoilers. The Pentateuch promised nothing which was not possible, even probable, if the priesthood succeeded where the prophets and kings had failed. Religious autonomy under the single, omnipotent God was far more to be prized than political independence with its warring factions, its loyalties divided between baal and Yahweh, and its prophets now terrorizing the people with Yahweh's relentless anger and now intoxicating them with visions of nature tamed, nations becalmed, and societies liberated from economic exploitation and social inequity. The triumph of the Pentateuch was a triumph over prophecy and the beautiful vision of "that day" when the leopard would lie down with the kid, when swords would be beaten into ploughshares, and when all the peoples of the world would look to Israel for the knowledge of the Lord.

This triumph is poetically confirmed by Ben Sira. Living at the high point of Aaronide-priestly supremacy, and inspired deeply by the revelation of Moses, Ben Sira focuses intently on Aaron and his sons, on ^{the} expiating powers of the cultus, and on the everlasting authority which was bestowed upon them by God Himself, and not on the prophetic visions of that day. He, to be sure, venerates the

prophets, but he is not intoxicated by their visions. It is the Pentateuch, not Isaiah's latter days, that he meditates ^{upon} ~~in~~ day and night, and it is the high priest of his day, Simon, that he looks to for religious leadership and inspiration, not Amos, or Hosea, or Micah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel.

III

The messianic idea thus lay dormant for several hundred years. And for good reason. The Pentateuch proved to be an incredibly good revelation for years marked by growing prosperity and relative peace, even as the Aaronides proved to be effective, judicious, and statesmanlike rulers who preserved religious autonomy by forswearing political independence. They were as amenable to Alexander as they had been to Artaxerxes. So long as they were convinced that their God was omnipotent, they were little concerned with terrestrial potentates--^{provided that} ~~so long as~~ the latter reaffirmed the right of the Aaronides to govern the religious life of the people of Israel in accordance with the laws of Moses.

But this relative serenity was punctured by a series of events which quickly toppled the proud tower of Aaronidism and catapulted the people of Israel into a searing crisis of leadership. Antiochus Epiphanes rudely altered the rules of the game when he undercut the legitimate High Priest by selling the office first to Jason and then to Meneleus, and by sending off into exile the rightful incumbent Onias III (). And since the new High Priest had gained the High Priesthood illegitimately, and since the second incumbent Meneleus actually went so far as

to subvert the Temple to Zeus, there was a desperate need for vital new leadership to avert seemingly certain disaster.

During those trying days of indecision and uncertainty, the need for prophetic vision stirred a highly sensitive and gifted individual to offer just such a vision in the form of ~~a pseudepi-~~graph, the book of Daniel. Purporting to be the writings of a prophet-like figure who had lived in Babylonia during the exile, the book of Daniel predicts that the disaster which had befallen the people of Israel had been anticipated by God, even as the deliverance, which was sure to follow for those who remained so steadfast that they preferred martyrdom to betrayal. For such as these, there would be a resurrection which God's omnipotence made possible and credible.

Though the book of Daniel may have been reassuring, the scholar class which sat itself in Moses' seat, the Scribes-Pharisees, did not revive prophecy to solve the problems of Aaronide collapse and Antiochene persecutions. Instead, they proclaimed a radically new concept of the Law and the salvation that awaited those who internalized its teaching. These Scribes-Pharisees affirmed that the Father God so loved the individual that He had revealed not one Law, but two Laws, the Written Law, the Pentateuch, and the Oral Law, so that the individual who internalized this two-fold Law could anticipate eternal life for his soul in the olam ha-ba, the world to come, and the resurrection of his body at some unknown future time. The Scribes-Pharisees thus transferred the problem from a focus on a terrestrial solution to a focus on a post-terrestrial solution. With one audacious swoop, the Scribes-Pharisees brushed aside the empirical world

as ultimately unreal and fashioned in its stead the world to come immediately on death, and the resurrection of the body which would come in the fullness of time. By this transference, the Scribes-Pharisees rejected a messianic solution for this-worldly problems. All would-be messiahs were regarded as frauds, for they ultimately were making God's justice and righteousness dependent on the outcome of a terrestrial gamble. The world to come was where God rewarded the souls of the righteous and punished the souls of the wicked. As for the resurrection of the dead, that was a long way off, and would occur when it occurred. That day would indeed usher in a world which would be utterly different than the terrestrial world of our experience.

The Scribes-Pharisees thus looked to no messiah for the resolution of the problems posed by a collapsing hierarchy and intense pressures to Hellenize. They supported Judah, Jonathan and Simon because they offered inspiring military leadership against the Syrians; they bestowed through their advocacy of the Oral Law the High Priesthood on Simon even though there was no warrant in the Pentateuch; they even acknowledged, first, Salome Alexandra's queenship and, subsequently, Herod's kingship even though neither was a descendent of David. Similarly, they admonished the people to pay the tribute to Caesar even as they sought to hold back the people from rebellion until the very last moment--and beyond. The Scribes-Pharisees simply refused to bend their fundamental teachings to external pressures. This world was a world of trial and testing. Obedience to the two-fold Law did not harvest terrestrial rewards. Pain, suffering, agony, poverty winnowed out the free-riders from the steadfast

in faith. Eternal life was stored up for sturdy, not frail, souls; for souls which could not be provoked into disbelief. The kingdom of God was an internal, not an external kingdom. So long as kings and emperors did not block the road to salvation, then their terrestrial hegemony must be endured, however harsh and provocative such rule might be.

IV

The Scribes-Pharisees would not budge and could not be lured by the prophetic visions of "the latter days." They knew all these prophecies, but they refused to apply them to the solution of terrestrial problems. Their visions were for a distant day when the dead would be resurrected, but not for the here and now. Such prophecies had no bearing on the sweeping away of Roman rule by some Son of Man, some Messiah, who would fulfill the prophecies in real time.

But there were those who imagined otherwise. They could not reconcile their belief in God's omnipotence and their reading of the messianic prophecies. The promise of the world to come and the resurrection of the dead at some distant time was not enough. God would make manifest His saving power now, if only the people would show themselves worthy. The kingdom of God was not only a kingdom within, but a terrestrial kingdom as well--a kingdom swept free of evil, a kingdom as envisaged in the most glowing of prophetic visions. Even as the Pharisees brushed aside messianic claims as fraudulent, messianic claimants insisted on making their bid for recognition. Of these messianic claimants, only one,

Jesus of Nazareth, so impressed his disciples that he became the Messiah for them, following on the very crucifixion which should have refuted his claims decisively.

↑
It was not Jesus' life which proved beyond question that he was the messiah, the Christ. It was his resurrection. It was only when his disciples were convinced that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead that they were stunned into awareness that Jesus was the Christ not by virtue of any signs and bona fides that attended his earthly ministry, but by his resurrection. He was thus like no messiah who had been foreshadowed in ancient prophecies; he was not like any messiah that Israelites had anticipated. For in all the speculation with respect to a messiah, there had been no premonition that the Messiah would prove himself to be the Christ after his death, not before; by his resurrection, not his life.

And it is precisely with respect to the resurrection that we are confronted with a startling paradox. The Scribes-Pharisees had resisted Jesus' claims to being the Messiah on the grounds that he had given no convincing signs, that he had not been preceded by Elijah, that he had defied the authority of the Pharisees. As far as they were concerned, his terrestrial bona fides were unimpressive. But now the claim had been elevated to a new level. Jesus' disciples bore witness that he had been resurrected and that it was his resurrection which proved beyond question that he must necessarily be the Messiah, the Christ. Yet this belief that resurrection was not only possible, but fundamental, was among the core teachings of the Pharisees. Jesus

disciples were thus predisposed to Jesus' resurrection not by the prophetic teachings, but by Pharisaic teachings. The very Pharisees who had developed a strictly defensive concept of the Messiah--a concept that effectively blocked any would-be messiah meeting the necessary criteria--were the very ones who, by teaching the resurrection of the dead as a vital dogma, opened the eyes of Jesus' disciples to the possibility that what they had seen could indeed be true. The issue, then, was not whether Jesus' resurrection was credible, but whether resurrection had indeed occurred. It was now a question of fact, not fantasy.

This is precisely the question which so agitated Paul. As a zealous follower of the Pharisees, Paul was certain that the world to come and the resurrection were the ultimate rewards for those who were "as to the Law blameless." Since Jesus had defied the Pharisees, he could not have been resurrected if the two-fold Law of the Pharisees was the road to salvation. Little wonder, then, that Paul's immediate reaction was violent opposition to the claims that Jesus had been resurrected. The very notion was both absurd and dangerous and should be rooted out. Resurrection was for the steadfast followers of the two-fold Law, not its detractors.

The more, however, Paul sought to eradicate the claim, the more did the question persist. Was Jesus' resurrection fact or fancy? The claim was credible--there was no impossibility here--but was it factual.

We know the outcome. There came a stunning moment of realization, a moment of transmutation, when the non-fact was translated into the fact. Jesus had indeed been resurrected. If resurrected, then the two-fold Law of the Pharisees cannot be the road to

salvation. The road must be the road of the risen Christ. Not the Law, but Christ's saving grace, was the path to eternal life. The Law was a snare and a delusion. It was the agent provocateur of sin. It masked the power of sin: for it created the illusion that obedience to the Law dissolved the primordial regenerative sources of sin within us. Sin skillfully manipulates the Law and arouses the very passions which it was meant to still. "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions aroused by the Law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. . ." Romans 7:5

"What shall we say? That the Law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the Law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the Law had not said 'You shall not covet.' But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the Law sin lies dead. . ." Romans 7:7-8

"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So, then, I of myself serve God, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. . . ." Romans 7:21-25

"For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do; sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirements of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. . ." Romans 8:3-4

Now what is striking about Paul's concept of the Christ is that it is rooted exclusively in the resurrection. It was not what Jesus had taught when he was alive, but what this life meant in the light of the resurrection. For Paul, Jesus is the Messiah because he was resurrected, and he was resurrected so that all might know that the power of sin could be dissolved only through God's grace as made manifest through Jesus Christ. Paul's concept of the Messiah is thus a highly original one, one which is not rooted in biblical prophecy, and which is not dependent on any radical transformation of the terrestrial order. What is to be transmuted is the individual. Through Christ's grace, he becomes a new creation. He sloughs off sin as he draws in Christ; and as sin falls away, he glimpses the eternal life which his faith has earned.

It was Paul's Christ which, in retrospect, was the vitally living Christ. Those followers who had anticipated that Christ would soon return to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth were harshly disappointed. For the fact is that Jesus did not fulfill, either during his lifetime or at any time thereafter, the biblical prophecies of "that day." If wars continued, economic and social exploitation remained the norm, and human degradation and humiliation went on apace, this did not mean that Christ had not come and that his power was illusory. Far from it. The more distant the day of his second coming, the more vivid was his immediate presence. Christ was overcoming sin in each individual who internalized him. One did not have to await Christ's return, since Christ had never gone away. The Christ within was the real Christ whose continuous saving grace was always transforming the

very nature of a true and believing Christian.

V

In retrospect, some revealing patterns had emerged by the third century. The Pharisaic and Tannaitic teachers had assigned the messianic hope a subordinate status in the hierarchy of beliefs. The decisive defeat of Bar Kochba's messianic pretensions had all too clearly exposed the danger lurking for Judaism and the Jewish people in a misreading of prophetic visions. The messianic belief was, to be sure, not abandoned, but it was not elevated to the status of dogma. Such a status was reserved for the belief in olam ha-ba, the world to come, and tehiat ha-metim, the resurrection of the dead. "All Israel has a share in the world to come" is the crisp affirmative declaration of the Mishnah.

"He who denies that the resurrection of the dead is articulated in the Torah" warns the Mishnah "is deprived of any share in the world to come." (Sanhedrin 10:1). The condemned criminal was admonished, as he drew near to the place of stoning, that he should confess, "for whoever confesses has a portion in the world to come." (Sanhedrin 6:2). "These are the things," according to the Mishnah, "the fruits of which a person eats in this world, even as the principle is set up for him in the world to come; honoring father and mother, the doing of gracious acts, and bringing about peace between a person and his neighbor; but the study of Torah is equal to all of them." (Mishnah Peah 1:1).

The focus was clearly on the world to come for the soul immediately on death, and resurrection of the body at some unknown

and unstated time. The coming of the Messiah is never interlinked with either the world to come or the resurrection. The two passages referring to the days of the Messiah are not associated with either of these vital dogmas. And never in the Mishnah is the messianic age held out to the believer as the reward for his righteousness. Whatever the days of the Messiah meant to the tannaitic sages, they were neither identified with or fused with either olam ha-ba or tehiat ha-metim. This needs especially to be stressed, since the fact that the resurrection was to occur at some point in time allowed for a melding of the two concepts. But such a melding is not attested in the Mishnah.

For the Christians a similar pattern had crystallized. Though the belief in the second coming was not abandoned, the focus was on the internalized Christ and the salvation which awaited the soul and ultimately awaited the body. The Christian leaders were no more eager to court disillusionment than were the tannaitic sages. Just as obedience to the internalized Law would yield immediate salvation for the soul when the body died, so faith in the internalized Christ would yield immediate salvation for the soul. Resurrection might be a long way off, but the soul could scarcely become impatient so long as it lived alongside God the Father.

The belief in the world to come and in the resurrection were thus for most Jews and for most Christians a sturdy shield for warding off the batterings of fate and the bludgeonings of chance. The outside world might be bleak, dreary and convulsed with pain, but the inner world was warmed with the golden glow of God's loving concern for the individual, a concern so deep and tender that He

had made possible for the truly faithful eternal life for the soul and resurrection for the body. This inner world was a reality so precious that the seductive snares of the outer world could not dissolve, or the pain, agony, humiliation and death inflicted by external forces, undermine.

But even believing Jews and faithful Christians could not so flee their human frailty as not to wish that it were otherwise. If only the inner and the outer would meld. If only the vivid prophecies of the latter days were ushered in, then, as God had promised, justice, righteousness, and mercy would go hand in hand with a harmonious nature and with a prosperous and joyous humankind. If only Christ would come again in all His glory, then there would be simultaneously a kingdom of God within and a kingdom of God without. And since such hopes were deeply rooted in scripture, Jews and Christians would have been less than human had they not, from time to time, responded to the tumult of wars, the ravaging of pestilence, the ceaseless poundings of disaster, and the relentless pressure of tragic happenings with illusions that the Messiah must be coming, or coming again. For Jews this was, at times, some leader of promise who was ready to gather armies to regain the Holy Land; at other times it was some charismatic personality who anticipated that God Himself would remove all obstacles, break down all barriers, as His messiah led the people back to the land for "that day" which Isaiah had foreseen.

We now know that the signs must have been misread; the meaning of the prophecies not deciphered. The Messiah neither came for the Jews nor became for the Christians. Each and every claimant had misled himself even as he had misled others. Neither simple piety, impressive strength, stunning erudition nor mystic intoxication

cation yielded a messiah for the Jews even when, as in the case of Shabbetai Zevi (1626-1676), an impressive array of respected scholars and vintage kabbalists convinced themselves and the masses-at-large that the sacred texts were clear and that the deepest mysteries utterly confirming.

VI

Judaism entered the modern world with a highly confused concept of the Messiah. Unlike the twin dogmas of the "world to come" and the "resurrection of the dead," the belief in the coming of the Messiah--a belief which Maimonides had elevated into a principle of faith--was highly vulnerable to empiric disaster,^{as} the Sabbatian debacle had so shockingly revealed. The coming of the Messiah was thus, for all intents and purposes, a non-coming. It was elevated into the realm of dream, fantasy and illusion. Indeed those, who like the followers of the Baal Shem ^{Tov}, the Hasidim, were so transported by vivid imaginings of the Messiah and his coming that they broke ^{forth} faith in dance and song, were the most scrupulous in keeping his real coming a far-off event. The more ardent the belief, the more remote the actualization.

The belief, however, had become a dogma and, as such, had to be dealt with by those Jews who became advocates of a westernized, modernized Judaism. The more radical among these, such as Abraham Geiger, who fathered the Reform movement, were embarrassed by what was for them the naive belief in a personal messiah, and transmuted this dogma into the concept of a messianic age. This

This age they visualized as the outcome of the modernization and westernization process which must, so they believed, press on inexorably till all the major problems of humankind would be resolved. Judaism, so they taught, was itself a religion of progressive revelation, which, in its highest stage of development, made manifest to all humankind the pure monotheism which was the essential revelation that prophets had proclaimed. They were confident that there would come a day in which God would be one, His name one, and His children drawn to one another with bonds of love. On that day, swords might indeed be built into ploughshares, poverty overcome, and exploitation vanish.

There was, however, an ironic aspect to their thinking. Convinced that Judaism was the bearer of universal truths and the Jewish people a people designated to spread these among the nations of the world, these leaders rejected for the Jewish people any national aspirations. For them, such aspirations would be a throwback, a betrayal of the divine mission of Israel to be a light to the nations, a beacon to the peoples. For them, the diaspora was evidence that Israel was a trans-territorial, trans-national, trans-political people--a people not by might but by spirit.

Yet these same ardent spokesmen of Israel's trans-national mission were no less ardent in their devotion to the nation-states in which they lived. Their zeal for the fatherland frequently took on a religious fervor, as they offered, week-in and week-out, heartfelt prayers for the well-being of their nation and its governors. Indeed, patriotism was deemed to be a positive commandment so long as it was not dedicated to the restoration of

a Jewish polity in the Holy Land.

VII

The coming of a messianic age proved to be as illusory as the coming of the Messiah. Westernization seeded total war, not total peace. The modern nation-state became the breeding ground of irrational hatreds, devastating weapons, rapacious ambitions, and insatiable greed. Its moment of glory was on that day when the guns of August launched eager and joyous armies to kill, ravage and despoil themselves. Its moment of truth was dawned four years later when peace settled over a Europe in shambles; when the inexorable march of progress bogged down in the muck of disaster; and when a star of ominous portent reddened on the eastern horizon. Bropped up by a Peace Treaty recrowning the sovereign nation-state, the peoples of Europe stumbled from economic stagnation to economic collapse, revealing as never before in human history the awesome power of sin to demolish all barriers, break through all dams, and tear down all fortresses which humans had devised for themselves to block the primordial lust of evil. And it was the fate of the Jews to illustrate this gruesome truth. Civilization was, it seemed, the agent provacteur of sin, not its master. The holocaust, not the messianic age, was human destiny; Hitler, not the son of David, was the Messiah. Or so it must have seemed to those whose road ended at Auschwitz and whose path broke off at Belsen.

VIII

Paralleling the trajectory of the European nation-states was the emergence of a novel concept of what the messianic age for Jews might be. Impressed with the first signs of reemergent anti-Semitism in the West, and convinced that the Jews of eastern Europe would never be liberated, gifted leaders transmuted the messianic hope. The redemption of the Jews was to be a national redemption. The people of Israel were not preeminently a people of God with a divine mission, but the manifestation of a powerful national spirit which refused to die. The prophets may have expressed the nation's yearnings and hopes in the religious images appropriate for their unenlightened age, and sages may have fortified the national spirit with the reassurance that God's anointed would some day restore His nation to their land. But however obscured by religious language, the essence of the people of Israel was the national, not the religious, spirit. The nation had donned a religious mantle for self-preservation during the centuries of naive faith and superstitious beliefs. Now, however, the protective covering might be stripped away as an enlightened sophisticated generation revealed nationalism to be the eternal underpinning of Jewish existence and a restored homeland the cornerstone of security, serenity, and reborn self-esteem. Pious Jews who prayed thrice daily for the restoration of its land Zion, but who looked upon secular Jewish nationalists as the sinners who were holding God back, were looked upon by the brave new breed of nationalist leaders as unwitting betrayers of the essence of Jewish people, the national idea or spirit.

This leadership thus shaped a radically novel concept of Jewish peoplehood and of the messianic hope. And this concept proved to be, in its own way, redemptive, for it stirred Jews with a vision of self-liberation and self-redemption and energized them to build the foundations for a modern viable society which was ready, willing and able to offset the holocaust with rebirth and the onrush of evil with a mighty fortress of fortitude, determination, and constructive growth. And the State of Israel still stands firmly as the beacon of development in the Middle East and as the light which may yet illumine the way for their Arab brothers.

IX

Let us pause briefly, on the edge of today and tomorrow, to get our bearings. We have come a long way from Isaiah's vision of "that day." We have chartered the ebbs and flows of messianic ideas and hopes. We have noted how they have not only waxed and waned, but how they have been transmuted. For the Aaronide priests, these hopes were of a bygone era; for the Scribes-Pharisees, they were subordinated to the more reassuring anticipation of the world to come, ^{and the} distant certainty of the resurrection. For medieval Jews, they were longings which, on infrequent occasions, could blind the eyes of even the clear-sighted so that they stumbled after would-be messiahs, but which for the most part were consoling imaginings of the impossible. For strident spokesmen for Reform Judaism, they were the intimations of a messianic age which lay at the end of progress' road, the summit of humankind's climb to redemption. For Jewish nationalists, they were

the mandate to build a secure and prosperous nation.

Are, then, the prophetic visions limited to what Jews have interpreted them to mean? Is their fulfillment limited to what has thus far been attained: an Israeli state with secure and recognized borders serving as a beachhead of development in the Middle East? Or do the prophecies hold yet within them unfulfilled possibilities? Is the security of the State of Israel the fulfillment or simply a reliable sign that fulfillment must be on its way?

If we seek to penetrate to the deepest meaning of Isaiah's prophecies, we discover that he was affirming that God has the power to do the seemingly impossible. God is not limited by the seeming imperatives of empirical experience. If God were, then Israel itself could not survive the obvious conclusion which any thinking person would have drawn from the destruction of the land, the gutting of the Temple, and the tossing of the people into exile. The empirical evidence revealed an impotent, not an omnipotent God. Yet, in response to the prophetic insistence that defeat was victory, destruction rehabilitation, exile redemption, the people of Israel simply denied the facts and persisted in their belief that their God was singular, omnipotent, and utterly committed to the creative survival of His people. Hence the first impossibility, Israel's ongoing creative existence, turned out to be a stubborn, irreducible fact.

What were the other impossibilities? Isaiah foresaw a time when nature would be so transformed that the lion would lie down with ^{lamb} ~~to~~ the land; peoples so transmuted that they would live in harmony with one another; congenital hatreds would dissolve as Egypt,

Assyria and Israel all recognized that each was God's chosen; when justice and righteousness would displace economic exploitation and social inequity; when human worth and dignity would be the norm; when the knowledge of the Lord would undergird a new creation.

What of these impossibilities? Is the empirical reading of reality to be triumphant? Are the brute facts to be decisive? Is evil so powerful that God's omnipotence is to be put to shame? Is there to be only a kingdom within and not without? Is humankind doomed to eternal warfare? Are nature and humankind to strive forever for destructive mastery? Are poverty and degradation to be the tragic destiny of the wretched of the earth? Is the holocaust to be the ultimate achievement of sinful man? Is "that day" to be a day of all consuming terror as God's claims to sovereignty are mocked, and as His glowing attributes of promise are snuffed out one by one?

As a believing Jew, I have deep faith that just as God has accomplished the impossible by preserving Israel despite the facts, so He has the power to shape with us a new creation. And the signs abound if we but have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. For at that very moment, when the demonic seemed to have gained decisive mastery, we began to latch on to the mind of God. And, ironically, the latching occurred as we strove to develop a weapon of such overwhelming power that Nazism would be doomed. The Manhattan project ushered a new age, for it revealed that it was possible to take an abstract, mathematical law of nature--a thought in the mind of God that holds together, sustains and regenerates His creation--and use it to create an end product which otherwise would have been impossible. And this tapping of

the mind of God did not end with lethal weapons of destruction. Drawing on abstract laws, immaterial formulae, invisible interconnections, we burst through our terrestrial limits. We rove through space, land men on astral bodies, explore the host of emergent possibilities as the realm of the impossible shrinks before the knowledge of God's eternal laws. We erase pestilence at its core; eradicate illness in its womb; and banish for all time immutable killers of yesteryear. With weightless thoughts, we create miracle rice; with abstractions we develop hardy new strains; with mental formulae we seed the abundance of the world to come. Indeed, as the knowledge of God's laws become known and prove true and steadfast, the impossible recedes. There, indeed, can come a day when nature and humankind are reconciled; when the lion may indeed lie down with the lamb, and when even death will die.

And if we turn to the international arena, we can glimpse, in the very depths of the strife and in the very core of the raging violence, the first seedlings of harmony among the nations. And one of these seedlings, sown in the furrows charred by the holocaust, is already beginning to bear fruit. The European Economic Community has proved that nation need not lift up sword against nation, even if such lifting-up belongs to its most cherished memories of national pride and aspiration. Germany and France will go to war against each other no more. Evil can be barred from demonic intrusions on the emergent good. Collaboration among the nations can diminish the lure of sovereignty even as it can foster the pursuit of national diversity.

And no less reassuring a sign, one plucked out of the

distressing pressures now besetting Israel in the wake of the U.N. resolution, is that on the very eve of the vote, the fifth and sixth ships with Israeli cargoes, passed through the Suez Canal and docked at Israeli ports. The settlement with Egypt is holding-- with all of its implications for the possibility of the impossible: the day on which all the nations of the Middle East will be one with each other, as Isaiah had predicted.

The curcial signs are here. They can be found by anyone who looks beneath the surging surface of events. They proclaim that Isaiah was right. God has the power to overcome the impossible if only we tap the mind and spirit of God. There can indeed be a new creation. Nations can live in harmony. Poverty can be overcome and exploitation end.

But these are as yet only the signs that the prophecies could come true. They are not in themselves the fulfillment. They signal to us that we can create a new kind of world, one which is the very negation of the world we have so long taken for granted as eternal. But for such a creation, we need not only the mind of God, but the spirit of God. Our awareness of the steadfast laws of nature gives as much power to destroy this world as to build the world to come. The Kingdom of God without can only be patterned on the Kingdom of God within. Without those divine attributes of goodness, mercy, justice and love, even the most impressive of worldly societies will be without life. The affluent individual will not be liberated by his affluence from the need for salvation: only that divinely implanted hierarchy of enduring values can displace ^{the} that alienation, ennui and despair which sears the souls of those who have ["]liberated themselves from God's justice, graciousness and love.

We are, I am convinced, going through the convulsions which the prophets always associated with the eve of "that day." They never promised an easy transition. And they had no illusions that God would shape a new creation without human collaboration. The messianic age is within our grasp, the prophecies are true prophecies, and their fulfillment is awaiting our decision--for God.